

Actor DeVita adds drama to MSO melodies

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That Prokofiev's ballet "Romeo and Juliet" should be dramatic, tragic and powerful is almost to be expected. It's based on Shakespeare's timeless play, after all, and the story has been successfully translated probably hundreds of times.

Where the Madison Symphony Orchestra shines is in bringing out the delicacy and the tenderness in the story, the quiet moments between the youthful doomed lovers. Under the baton of conductor Daniel Hege, selections from Prokofiev's work are as exciting as ever, as striking in the quiet moments as in the explosive ones.

Mozart's "Paris" symphony opens the first MSO concert of the new year with a sound and themes that are nothing short of "delightful," as Michael Allsen notes in the program. Guest conductor Hege, visiting Madison from Syracuse, leads a smaller, 50-plus member version of the orchestra through a beautifully precise rendition of the 1778 symphony.

Hege as a conductor is noticeably grounded, restrained in his gesture if not his dynamics. He pulls a bright, bold sound from the orchestra with slight movements and careful cues.

The Mozart, in particular, benefits from Hege's touch, from the clean rhythms in the strings during the first movement to the smooth, buttery sounds of the Andante. The final Allegro is such fun, showcasing virtuosity in the strings and contrasting intense and serene moments.

A showcase of virtuosity is also the best way to describe Norwegian violinist Henning Kraggerud's performance of the Sibelius Violin Concerto in D Minor. Kraggerud, looking youthful with his shaggy brown hair and mandarin collar tuxedo, displays a mastery of his instrument using double stops and impressive precision in the fast passages.

The concerto begins softly as though rising from a distance, evoking a frozen landscape (or is that just a memory of the double-digit negative temperatures outside?). Sounding ominous at times, sweet at others, the concerto swells majestically in the second movement, often with militaristic intensity.

Following intermission, American Players Theatre actor James DeVita joins Hege and the orchestra for about 40 minutes of "Romeo and Juliet." From "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene /From ancient grudge break to new mutiny," to "For never was a story of more woe /Than this of Juliet and her Romeo," hearing DeVita speak Shakespeare's lines with Prokofiev's text is, to use a modern descriptor, just really cool.

The orchestra nearly doubles in size for the second half of the concert, bringing a full, powerful sound to Prokofiev's lush score. "The Montagues and the Capulets" warns of impending tragedy, followed by a playful tune in the winds to reflect Juliet's youth in "Juliet the Young Girl."

We can see Juliet's fiery cousin posture and threaten in "The Death of Tybalt" with pizzicato rhythms and dissonant tones, dissolving into the sweet and sorrowful "Romeo and Juliet before Parting."

DeVita meshes well with the orchestra, never distracting, embodying the young people, the nurse, and the prince with equal skill. Just to hear spoken words of any kind with the symphony is its own kind of thrill, and DeVita makes it that much better.

With three very different, very dramatic works, the symphony proves its versatility and creativity with an excellent start to the new year.